The Influence of Conversation, with the Regulation thereof:

A

SERMON

PREACHED AT

ST. CLEMENT DANE,

TO A

RELIGIOUS SOCIETY.

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LONDON:

PRINTED FOR F. AND C. RIVINGTON,
BOOKSELLERS TO THE
SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE,
NO. 62, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD;
By Bye and Law, St. John's-square, Clerkenwell.

1800.

The Influence of Converſation, with the Regulation thereof.

PROV. XIII. 20.

HE THAT WALKETH WITH WISE MEN SHALL BE WISE; BUT A COMPANION OF FOOLS SHALL BE DESTROYED.

CONVERSATION has ever juſtly been accounted a powerful Inſtrument of Good or Evil; it has had ever a mighty Influence on the Conduct of Human Life; and the Vice or Virtue of the World has ever, in a great Meaſure, been owing to it. The Regulation, therefore, of it, did in all Ages demand the utmoſt Prudence and Caution, but ſurely in none more than in this of ours. *Now*, if ever, it is neceſſary for us to exhort all that have a Concern for their own Souls, to ſhun the Way of the Sinner, and refrain their Feet from the Path of the Wicked. *Now*, if ever, it is neceſſary for us to exhort all that fear the Lord, to unite and combine themſelves for the Defence of his Honour, for the Security of

their own Souls; and, if it be poſſible, for the giving a Check to Sin, and propagating Holineſs, in this impious Generation. For now the Number and Confidence of Sinners increaſes daily; Atheiſm and Prophaneneſs ſpread like a Leproſy; there is nothing in Example, nothing in Diſcourſe, that ſpeaks us Chriſtians; we ſeem to have quitted, not only the Morals, but the Principles of the Goſpel, and have degenerated ſo far from the Modeſty, Purity, Sanctity and Dignity of Chriſtian Converſation, that the leaſt Air of Seriouſneſs and Gravity begins to look ſingular and unfaſhionable: So that, what is worſt of all, whilſt the Wicked publiſh their Sin as *Sodom*, and hide it not, Religion ſeems to want Aſſurance, to diſtruſt its own Cauſe, and to be in a Manner out of Countenance every where, but in the Cloſet and the Temple; and we are in Danger in a little while to ſee Men more aſhamed of Virtue than of Vice. Theſe are the Reflections which determine me to this Subject. There is nothing obſcure in the Text; I am only to mind you, that Wiſdom and Goodneſs, Folly and Sin, are Terms equivalent in the Language of the Scripture, and particularly of this Book of *Proverbs:* And that to make up the Antitheſis or Oppoſition between the two Parts of this Verſe entire and full, we muſt read it thus: *He that keeps company with the virtuous and good, will himſelf be virtuous and happy: but he that keeps company with the vicious, will be vicious and miſerable.* The Text then contains theſe two Propoſitions:

I. That

I. That Men generally become ſuch as the Company they keep.
II. That Happineſs is the natural Reſult or Fruit of Holineſs, and Miſery of Sin.

I will therefore, 1. Inſiſt on each of theſe Doctrines, and then give you two or three Rules for your due Conduct in Reference to Society.

Firſt, That Men are generally ſuch as their Acquaintance and Familiars are. This is affirmed in my Text, no leſs with Reference to good than bad Company: There is one general and plain Reaſon for this; all Men are naturally Lovers of themſelves, and therefore the moſt effectual Way of endearing and obliging one another is by mutual Reſpects and Compliances; no Man can make his Court more effectually to another, than by falling in with him in Opinion and Practice, approving his Judgment, and obſerving his Inclination; this is that which flatters our Self-love, the predominant Principle in our Natures; this is that which renders Society agreeable, and Friendſhip laſting; which is never to be hoped for, where Mens Principles and Humours are inconſiſtent and incompatible: Ere we can be pleaſed ourſelves, or pleaſe others, we muſt be mutually faſhioned and moulded into an Agreement and Conformity of Principles and Morals, we muſt be acted and governed by the ſame Affections and Inclinations, and moved and led by the ſame Deſires and Paſſions. This is ſo far the univerſal Senſe of Mankind, that it

has eſcaped no body's Obſervation; all act and judge by this Rule; we eſtimate Men by the Intimacies they maintain; and he is thought to have forfeited all Pretenſion to good Senſe or good Breeding, who does not ſtifle thoſe Sentiments, and ſuppreſs thoſe Inclinations, which are apt to ſhock the Company he is in, or give any Diſturbance or Diſguſt to his Friends. From hence the Propoſition laid down follows with undeniable Evidence, *That Men are generally ſuch as their Companions are:* For that Society will ſoon be diſſolved, where we reap no Satisfaction from it; and we can reap none where there is no Agreement in our Notions and Inclinations.

But that this Truth, which is of the higheſt Conſequence, may be the more deeply imprinted, I will proceed to a more diſtinct and particular Illuſtration of it. And firſt, "of the Influence good Company has on us towards making us wiſe and good." There are two Things in wiſe Men which never fail to work upon their Friends and Acquaintances: Firſt, Good Diſcourſes; Secondly, Good Examples.

Firſt then as to *good Diſcourſe*; how manifeſt is the Tendency of this? what Light, what Strength, what Pleaſure does it miniſter? how does it awaken the Conſcience, and purify the Heart? how does it quicken us when we languiſh? how does it recal and reduce us when we begin to forget ourſelves, and lay aſide a wiſe Sobriety of Mind and holy Fear? how does it raiſe us when we ſink and grovel, and how often does it kindle in us wiſe Deſires and holy Purpoſes? Thus *Solomon* obſerves,

That

That the Lips of the Wiſe diſperſe Knowledge, Prov. xv. 7. and the New Teſtament tells us, concerning this Kind of Diſcourſe, that it *miniſters Grace to the Hearer*; that it *edifies and builds us up in our Holy Faith*: And the Diſciples, going to *Emmaus*, remark what Life and Spirit there was in the Converſation of our Lord: *Did not our Hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the Way, and while he opened to us the Scriptures?* Luke xxiv. 32. Now, though no Words can ever be impregnated with the ſame Force and Energy with which our Lord's were; yet certainly, when God and our great Mediator, when the Riches of Divine Grace, when Righteouſneſs and Heaven are the Subjects of our Diſcourſe; when our Language flows from the Heart, and is animated by a vital and experimental Senſe of that we talk of; when it has all the Advantages which a true Friendſhip and known Integrity, and the moſt favourable Opportunities can give it: Such Diſcourſe can never fail of moving and affecting us.

From Diſcourſe I paſs on to Example; and here it is certain, That Virtue never appears ſo beautiful and lovely as in Action: That it is repreſented with much more Life, in the Practice of a wiſe and good Man, than it can be in Rules and Precepts: That the Notions we form of Duty from the Lives of others, are generally more correct and juſt, than thoſe which we form even from the Scriptures themſelves; for we are apt to bend and accommodate the Rule a little in favour of ourſelves, but we never do ſo in favour of others: That

the Excellencies and Perfections of a Friend are very ſtrong Incitements to Emulation, and very ſenſible Reproofs of our Remiſſneſs and comparative Barrenneſs and Unprofitableneſs; and on the other Side, his Defects are excellent Leſſons of Caution and Watchfulneſs: it is, laſtly, certain, that whatever Beauty and Lovelineſs there be in Virtue, it receives a new Acceſſion from the Example of my Friend, whoſe Integrity I know; and the Eſteem and Affection I have for him, is apt to beget in me a Value for every Thing he approves, and inclines me to be pleaſed with what he does. But theſe Arguments are too many and too copious to be dwelt on; I content myſelf therefore only to have mentioned them, and will lay before you but this one ſingle Conſideration: A good Life in a Companion is certainly a mighty Motive and Encouragement to us; for while we behold our Friends diſcharging the Parts of good *Chriſtians*, we ſee in them not only what we ought to do, but what we may do. Whatever is poſſible to them, is poſſible to us too; for they are clad with the ſame Frailties and Paſſions, expoſed to the ſame Temptations, and have no other Aſſiſtances than what we have, or may have. In them we have plain Demonſtration of the Truth and Power of Religion; we can no longer imagine that Faith is a mere Speculation or Amuſement, or Virtue a mere Pretence or Name; under theſe Convictions we ſhall either come to a Reſolution ourſelves to do our Duty, or ſhall ſuffer the daily Reproaches of our own Minds. This is the natural Influence of Example; It Inſtructs,

it

it Reproves, Exhorts, and, if it do not prevail, it Condemns. Thus St. *Paul*, Heb. xii. 1. *Wherefore being compaſſed about with ſuch a Cloud of Witneſſes, let us lay aſide every Weight, and the Sin that does ſo eaſily beſet us: And let us run with Patience the Race that is ſet before us.* Where the Apoſtle plainly teaches us, that, if the Faith and Patience of Martyrs and Confeſſors do not move us to imitate their Virtues, they will certainly ſerve to upbraid and condemn us at the laſt Day; and certainly the Examples of the Living, and thoſe of our Familiars and Friends, cannot but have as much Force and Power in them, as thoſe of the Dead: Nay much more, for the Reaſons I have already ſuggeſted. Will not our own Hearts be apt to reaſon thus with us, on every Reflection we make on the Virtues of our Friend? What am I doing? can he and I go to the ſame Place at laſt? he purſues a Crown by Works of Faith, and ſhall I obtain it by the Works of Darkneſs? he ſeeks a Heaven by the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope; and ſhall I gain it by Sloth and Idleneſs, by Senſuality and Looſeneſs? he mortifies the Body, while I indulge it; he prays and contends, and paſſes his Life in holy Fear, while I am careleſs and unconcerned about a future State. His Conduct is regular, his Diſcourſe heavenly, the Bent of his Soul is toward that which is good; but how little do I mind theſe Things? how hard is it for me not to let him ſee that I am wholly ſet upon the Pleaſures and Profits of this World? what do I mean? am I indeed in the right, and he in

the wrong? Is Religion indeed but a well-deviſed Fable? Alas! I ſee the contrary. I ſee that there is Truth and Reaſon on his Side; I cannot but reverence him, and think him happy; I cannot but own that he follows his Reaſon, I my Luſt and Fancy. How uneaſy theſe Kind of Soliloquies muſt be, and how naturally they will end, either in reforming our Follies, or in breaking off and quitting a Converſation which gives us ſo much Trouble, you cannot but ſee.

I HAVE done with the *Influence of good Company*; I am next to conſider *that of bad.* This Subject, after what I have in general ſaid, does not require long inſiſting on. Daily Experience is too plain, too ſad a Proof of this Truth, That Sin is catching and infectious: That Human Nature is ſo prone to Evil, that it needs very little Temptation or Encouragement to it: That ill Principles and Practices are ſoon propagated; and, if they find any Countenance and Approbation from thoſe we converſe with, they will eaſily bear down all the Oppoſition which the Modeſty of a civil Education, the weak Impreſſions of Reputation, or Decency, or the Checks of natural Reaſon, can raiſe againſt them. Nay, Holineſs itſelf, unleſs well grown, and deeply rooted, can ſcarcely reſiſt the Contagion which ill Company ſpreads. *Can a Man* (ſaith *Solomon*) *take Fire in his Boſom, and his Cloaths not be burnt?* Prov. vi. 27. And *evil Communication* (ſaith St. *Paul*) *corrupts good Manners*, 1 Cor. xv. But we ſhall be more ſenſible of the pernicious

Effects of ill Company, if we conſider theſe two or three Things.

1. Sin is the Cement of the Friendſhips and Intimacies of Sinners; Vice is the Subject of their Converſation, and ſome Senſuality or other makes up the Diverſion and Entertainment of ſuch Company. And how can it be otherwiſe? *Out of the Abundance of the Heart the Mouth ſpeaketh*, Matt. xii. 32. What can the Mouth utter but Sin and Folly, when the Heart is full of Wantonneſs, Luſt, Pride, Envy, Ambition, Sottiſhneſs, or Vanity? What but polluted Streams can flow from a polluted Fountain? What but Evil can an evil Man bring forth out of the *evil Treaſure of the Heart?* Matt. xii. 35. How hard is it then even for a good Man to maintain the Character and Dignity of his Mind, where Cenſures and Slanders, malicious Wit, or Trifling and Impertinence, make up the Converſation? How hard is it, even for ſuch a one, to preſerve the Purity and Sobriety of his Mind; where Riot and Luxury is the Buſineſs they meet about; where Pride and Oſtentation of Life is the only Thing admired; and nothing has any Savour in it, that is wiſe or good, devout or humble? And, if a virtuous Perſon can in ſuch Company ſcarce keep his Ground, how eaſily are thoſe borne away by the Stream, who are of themſelves but too prone to Evil, and too fond of Temptation?

2. Ill Company does naturally inſtil and propagate vicious Principles, worldly Maxims,

ſenſual, carnal Improvements: Here we are furniſhed with Objections againſt God and Providence, with Excuſes and Apologies for Sin; here we learn to ridicule Religion and Conſcience, and diſpute ourſelves out of all Senſe and Duty. It is of this Sort of Communication St. *Paul* ſpeaks, when he ſaith, *That it corrupts good Manners.* And at this Day, thoſe Errors which fret like a Canker, and conſume every Thing that is wiſe and ſerious in us, have multiplied ſo beyond meaſure, that they are no longer the Encloſure of ſome few Pretenders to Freedom and Reaſon, but the fooliſheſt and meaneſt, as well as the moſt vicious Part of Mankind, are deeply tinged with them.

3. Ill Company creates Confidence in Sin; a Cuſtom of talking unconcernedly and looſely does naturally make Way for Careleſſneſs and Liberty in our Actions; and, if we repeat either often, we ſhall ſoon grow bold and ſtupid in Sin: For, if we neglect to make any Reflection upon our Words or Actions, we ſhall be inſenſibly betrayed into a Hardneſs of Heart; or, if (what is worſe) we be driven, by the Reproaches of our Conſcience upon Reflection, to take Sanctuary in the Cheats and Impoſtures, whether vulgar or more refined, which Sinners are wont to put upon themſelves, we ſhall ſoon ſink into Prophaneneſs and Atheiſm. Having thus unfolded to you the Truth of the firſt Propoſition, and ſhewed you that Men become ſuch as their Company; I am next to proceed to the

Second,

Second, "That Happineſs is the Fruit of Wiſdom, and Miſery of Folly." Men may flatter themſelves as they pleaſe, and delude themſelves with vain Words; they may call the Proud and Rich happy; they may admire the proſperous Sinner, and, in a ſenſeleſs Fit, applaud themſelves in their vicious Pleaſures; but they muſt bid Defiance, not only to Revelation, but even Reaſon and Experience too, ere they can promiſe themſelves a true and laſting Satisfaction in any Thing but Virtue. Revelation tells us plainly, *that Godlineſs*, and that only, *has the Promiſe of the Life that now is, and of that which is to come*, 1 Tim. iv. 1. That, *if we ſow to the Fleſh, we ſhall of the Fleſh reap Corruption; but, if through the Spirit we mortify the Deeds of the Body, we ſhall live*, Gal. vi. 8. That *we muſt all appear before the Judgment-ſeat of Chriſt, that we may receive according to what we have done in the Body, whether it be good or evil*, 2 Cor. v. 10. And both Reaſon and Experience, as well as Revelation, tell us, that Sin is fruitleſs and diſhonourable: Rom. vi. 21. *What Fruit had ye then in thoſe Things whereof you are now aſhamed?* That *there is no Peace to the Wicked:* That *they are like a troubled Sea when it cannot reſt, continually throwing up its own Mire and Dirt*, Iſa. lvii. 20. That the Miſeries and Calamities of Life ſpring from Sin: That Sin blaſts our Enjoyments and Poſſeſſions; that it gives Sting and Edge to all our Miſeries and Misfortunes: For, if we did not doat upon the Body and the World, the Evils of Life could not

not wound us ſo deeply. In a Word, Revelation, Reaſon, Experience aſſure us, that Righteouſneſs fills the Mind with Peace and Joy; that Sin tortures it with Contradictions and unreaſonable Paſſions, with the Guilt and the Terrors of the Lord; and what think we muſt be the Reſult of both in another World; *In the Day of the Revelation of the Righteous Judgment of God?* Rom. viii. 5. Muſt the Nature of Things be altered, that the Sinner may be ſaved? Muſt Religion be an Impoſture, that Madneſs and Folly may prove Wiſdom? Muſt Reaſon be a mere Amuſement, that Luſt and Fancy may be infallible Guides? Muſt the Judgment of another World contradict all our Senſe and Experience in this, that the little Raillery and Sophiſtry of the looſe and vicious Part of Mankind may prove the only Thing that has Solidity and Weight in it? Theſe are Things too abſurd and ridiculous to be fancied. I will enlarge no longer on a Truth which is controverted by none, except the Prophane and Atheiſtical, but will on to the third Thing propoſed.

Thirdly, To give you ſome Advice for your better Conduct, as to Society, or keeping Company. This may be reduced to three Heads:

1. We muſt be very cautious what Company we keep.

2. We muſt endeavour to make the beſt Uſe of it.

3. We

3. We muſt be fully perſuaded, that the due Government of ourſelves in this Point is a Matter of the higheſt Moment.

1ſt. As to the firſt Rule: We muſt reject the Authority of Scripture, if we refuſe to obſerve it; for this expreſsly forbids us to aſſociate ourſelves with the Wicked and Vicious: Prov. iv. 14, 15. *Enter not into the Path of the Wicked, and go not into the Way of evil Men; avoid it, paſs not by it; turn from it, and paſs away.* 2 Theſſ. iii. 6. *Now we command you, Brethren, in the Name of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, that ye withdraw yourſelves from every Brother, that walks diſorderly, and not after the Tradition which he received of us.* 1 Cor. v. 11. *But now I have written unto you, not to keep Company; If any Man that is called a Brother be a Fornicator, or Covetous, or an Idolater, or a Railer, or a Drunkard, or an Extortioner, with ſuch a one, no not to eat.* Nor do the Examples of Holy Men deviate in this Point from the Precepts and Exhortations of the Spirit. Pſalm xxvi. 4, 5. *I have not ſat with vain Perſons, neither will I go in with Diſſemblers. I have hated the Congregation of Evil-doers, and will not ſit with the Wicked.* Pſalm cxix. 63. *I am a Companion of all them that fear thee, and them that keep thy Precepts.* And thus it was with other good Men, they did equally covet good, and ſhun evil Company. Thus Mal. iii. 16. *When Wickedneſs abounded, then they that feared the Lord talked often one to another.* And in the firſt Times of Chriſtianity, great

was

was the Intimacy and Dearneſs of the Diſciples of *Jeſus* one with another; great was their Abhorrence of all the Works of Darkneſs, and all Communion and Fellowſhip with thoſe that practiſed them, as may eaſily be inferred from *Acts* ii. and iii. and other Places of Holy Writ. The Scripture then is plain in this Point: and, from what I have ſaid, it appears that Reaſon is ſo too, unleſs we can think that Wiſdom and Folly, Happineſs and Miſery, are Things indifferent.

But here it will be objected, At this Rate we ſhall ſoon find ourſelves obliged to renounce the World, and quit all Company. Is not our Caſe much the ſame with that which St. *Paul* puts, 1 Cor. v. 9, 10? *I wrote unto you in an Epiſtle, not to company with Fornicators; yet not altogether with the Fornicators of the World, or with the Covetous or Extortioners, or with Idolaters, for then muſt ye needs go out of the World.* To this I anſwer, 1. Be it granted, as the Objection ſuppoſes, that we muſt keep ill Company, or none, in this Caſe I affirm it is far better to keep none. Retirement is not ſo dreadful a Thing to a Chriſtian, as ſome think; the Calm and Peace of the Mind is much more deſirable than Noiſe and Laughter; and the Quiet and Regularity of Privacy much to be preferred before the Senſuality and Confuſion of vicious Company. Nor need any one complain of the Uncomfortableneſs of Solitude, who can converſe when he pleaſes with Patriarchs, Prophets, and Apoſtles; nay, with God and his Son *Jeſus*. A good Man may

may meet God, like *Iſaac*, *in the Fields*, or *Moſes in the Deſart*; he may enjoy Communion with him, like *David*, *in his Bed-chamber*, or *Joſeph in the Dungeon*. The Promiſe, *John* xii. 23. is not limited to place; *If a Man love me, he will keep my Words, and my Father will love him; and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.* But, on the other Hand, in the Company of the Wicked we ſhall never find God, nor ever feel any effects of his gracious Preſence, but ſhall be expoſed to the Attempts and Practices of Evil Spirits, and to the Contagion of Vice. The wiſe Man obſerves, that it is better to live alone, than with a Companion of a rough, untractable, and exaſperating Temper: But I am ſure there can be no Company, how froward and rough ſoever, ſo fatal to our Happineſs, as that which inſtils Vanity under the Advantages and Opportunities of Friendſhip: No Solitude can be ſo diſmal or uncomfortable as that Society which infects the Heart, or darkens the Underſtanding; no Provocation or Inſolence can be half ſo injurious, as that Converſation which tends to Softneſs or Debauchery, to the betraying us into a Love of this World, and a Forgetfulneſs of God.

2. This Objection may have ſome Colour in a Pagan or a Jewiſh World, but ſure it has none in a Chriſtian one. The Church of Chriſt is not yet left like a Cottage in a Vineyard; our Jeruſalem is not yet degenerated to the Degree of *Jeruſalem* of old, when God ſpoke thus of it in the Prophet, *Jer.* v. 1. *Run ye to and fro through the Streets of Jeruſalem, and ſee now,*

now, and know, and ſeek in the broad Streets thereof, if you can find a Man, if there be any that executeth Judgment, that ſeeketh the Truth, &c. Nor need we yet pray with the Pſalmiſt, *Pſalm* xii. 1. *Help, O Lord, for the godly Man ceaſeth, for the Faithful fail from among the Children of Men:* For the Servants of God are yet numerous; nor are they driven to their ſecret Chambers, or to the Wilderneſs, or aſhamed to own their Lord and Saviour, or to make an open Profeſſion of the Hope that is in them.

I grant, will you ſay, that there are good Chriſtians, but they are not eaſily, they are not every-where to be found; but the Worſhippers of Pleaſure do every-where ſwarm, every-where haunt us. There is an eaſy Remedy for this; Do thy Duty with an humble and unaffected Confidence, with a ſteady and unalterable Reſolution: Put on the Garb of a Diſciple; let the Air of a Chriſtian appear in every Thing that thou doeſt, or ſayeſt; let the Brightneſs and Beauty of Holineſs, that enriches and adorns the Soul, break forth ever and anon in thy Converſation; and thou ſhalt ſoon ſee, that the Good will love thee, but the Wicked will forſake thee: They will ſhun thee, as Ghoſts are ſaid to do the Light of Day; or as Hypocrites and Profligates did the Society of the firſt Chriſtians; and of the *reſt durſt no Man join himſelf unto them*, Acts v. 13. Thou doſt too much accommodate thyſelf to the Modes and Humours of the World, and this draws upon thee the Company of the Impertinent and Vicious; it is an earthly

earthly vaniſhing Splendor, about which theſe Moths and Night-flies flutter: It is Jet, not Gold and Diamond, that is ſaid to attract Straws.

3. But laſtly, This Rule obliges us only as far as we can (the Nearneſs of Relation, or neceſſary Buſineſs, does ſometimes make it our Duty to converſe with thoſe which we otherwiſe would decline; and, in this Caſe, all that can be expected is) not to have any Fellowſhip or Communion with them in their Vices, but to diſcountenance or reprove them. And, as the World goes now, I think this Rule is to be extended no farther than to Intimacies and Familiarities, to voluntary and choſen Acquaintance, not to accidental Meetings, or occaſional Correſpondencies. But we muſt take Care not to be too favourable and compliant in this Matter; The more Sin abounds, the leſs Diſcipline is or can be exerciſed, the more zealous ſhould we be in particular to do Honour to Religion, and to fix a Mark of Shame and Infamy upon Vice. Never is this Rule more ſcandalouſly tranſgreſſed, than when Prieſts and Prelates court the Company and Favour of Atheiſts and Adulterers: Or Matrons and Virgins that of a wretched Woman, whoſe State and Port is not more notorious than the Shame and Lewdneſs that maintains it. How can our Wives or Daughters think that there is any Shame or Turpitude in the Sin, when we pay ſo much Reſpect to the Sinner?

2*dly*, We muſt conſider what ought to be the true End and Deſign of Society and Converſation among Chriſtians. Certainly that Man has a very mean and low notion of Friendſhip, who propoſes no other End than to eat and to drink together, or to laugh and fool away our precious Moments. The Scripture points out to us much nobler Purpoſes and Deſigns of Converſation, when it tells us that our Speech ſhould be ſuch *as may adminiſter Grace*; that we ſhould *build up one another in our holy Faith*; that we ſhould *comfort one another, exhort one another continually*, and ſo much the more, becauſe *the Day approaches*, &c. and ſurely we are ſtrangely miſtaken, if we think that our Communication will loſe all Guſt, by being directed to one of theſe Ends. On the contrary, it would doubtleſs be as much more delightful as beneficial, if, when we meet, we were accuſtomed, inſtead of Cenſures and Reflections, News and Impertinence, or Frothineſs and Lightneſs, to diſcourſe of ſome worthy and noble Subject, becoming the Genius and Hope of a Chriſtian. The Example of *David* confirms this Notion: he tried, and found, that Friendſhip was both uſeful and pleaſant; whilſt it was maintained on the Stock of Religion; *My Companion, my Guide, my Familiar Friend; we took ſweet Counſel together, and walked unto the Houſe of God in Company*, Pſalm iv. 13, 14.

To this it will be again objected, It will be very difficult at all Times to find Matter and

and Occaſion for good Diſcourſe. I anſwer,

1. I do not utterly and totally exclude the common Accidents of Life, the Buſineſs and Affairs of it, nay, even Things of a pleaſant and divertive Nature, if modeſt and inoffenſive, from being ſometimes the Subjects of Converſation; but, I ſay, Religion ought to be the main and great End of it. 2. It is hard for me to conceive, how a good Chriſtian ſhould often want either Matter or Opportunity for pious Diſcourſe. As for Matter, he muſt ſuffer the Providences of God to paſs without any Obſervation or Remark; he muſt be a Stranger to the Works of Nature; he muſt be utterly unread in the Hiſtory of Human Affairs; he muſt be unacquainted with the Book of God; and he muſt have little Experience of the Power and Operation of God's Word and Spirit upon his own Soul; he muſt have reflected very little on the Wiles of Satan, the Temptations of the World, and the Defects and Weakneſſes of Human Nature, who can want Matter for good Diſcourſe. The Man of Letters, the Man of Buſineſs, the Man of Pleaſure, never wants Matter; Books furniſh the one, Buſineſs the other, and their Vices and Diverſions the third. It is ſtrange, that the Chriſtian alone ſhould be barren. The Chriſtian! who is a Child of the Light, and of the Day, and ſhould abound in Wiſdom and Underſtanding. The Chriſtian! who has every Hour Matters of the higheſt Importance on his Hands! And who, finally, is entertained with more and richer Pleaſures, than the moſt fortunate *Epicurean* can pretend

to.

to. As to Occaſion or Opportunity of good Diſcourſe, did the Heart run that Way, every Thing would afford it us. But alas! we rather ſhun than ſeek Occaſions: And I know not by what ſtrange Error we have baniſhed all Matters of Religion out of Company; as if nothing but Ignorance or Affectation could make a Man ſo impertinent, as to talk of any Thing that were pious and good. I beſeech you to conſider, whether this be not a very near Approach to the being aſhamed of Chriſt: And, if it be, how ſhall we eſcape that dreadful Sentence which is denounced againſt it? *Mark* viii. 38. *Whoſoever ſhall be aſhamed of me, and of my Words, in this wicked and adulterous Generation, of him alſo ſhall the Son of Man be aſhamed, when he cometh in the Glory of his Father with the holy Angels.* This minds me of the

3d, and laſt Direction, which is, That we muſt be thoroughly perſuaded that the right Conduct of ourſelves, in the Point of Society, is a Matter of the higheſt Moment and Importance. Does not the Scripture plainly ſuggeſt this, when our Saviour tells us, *Matt.* xii. *That by our Words we ſhall be juſtified, and by our Words we ſhall be condemned?* And St. *James* tells us, *James* iii. 2. *If any Man offend not in Words, the ſame is a perfect Man.* And it is no Wonder the Scripture lays ſo great a Streſs, or ſets ſo great a Value on the due Government of the Tongue, ſince nothing tends more to the pleaſing of God, to the Honour and Intereſt of Religion, and to the forming the Morals

Morals of Men. As to this latter, the forming every Man's particular Manners, I have ſaid enough: One Thing here I will only remark; never was there a more illuſtrious Proof of the Efficacy of Religious Converſation, than in the primitive Times. Next to that of the Spirit of God itſelf, the Chriſtians found no greater Support under all their Trials, than what they derived from their mutual Encouragements and Exhortations of one another. And I do not queſtion, but that Religious Friendſhip would be as uſeful now to preſerve us againſt the Snares and Pleaſures of Sin, as it was then to uphold them under their fiery Trials and Afflictions, were our Diſcourſes now actuated by the ſame Spirit theirs were then. As to the pleaſing God; muſt not God, think you, be as well pleaſed with our talking of, and magnifying his wondrous Works, in our familiar Converſations with one another, as with our praiſing or extolling him in our Cloſets? And muſt not the Regard and Reverence which we teſtify for him in Company, be as acceptable to him as our private Adorations? Spring they not from the ſame Principle? And is not the one as ſubſervient (to ſay no more) to his Glory as the other? As to the Honour and Intereſt of Religion, nothing can more effectually promote it, than the giving a frequent and public Teſtimony of our Value for it. Which way can we more clearly convince the World of the Excellency and Virtue of it? Which Way can we more effectually propagate in one another the Love of it, than by making it appear that it has

moulded

moulded and formed our Souls into the Image of God; that it has poſſeſſed our Thoughts, and refined our Converſation? But, on the other Hand, if we have no Regard to our Talk, if we think this a Matter which Conſcience is not concerned in, we ſhall ſoon ſee Religion daily loſe Ground; for we ſhall ſoon learn to think and act with the ſame Liberty we talk; and this will introduce a ſtrange Face of Things in a little Time.

Now to cloſe all: If our Care or Unconcernment in this Point be of this vaſt Conſequence, we cannot but think we ſhall be called to a ſtrict Account about it in another World; the Day is coming when the Lord will fulfil his Promiſe, *Mal.* iii. *And the Lord hearkened and heard, and a Book of Remembrance was written: And they ſhall be mine, ſaith the Lord, in that Day when I make up my Jewels.* The Day is coming when God will execute the Threat denounced in the Apoſtle *Jude*, *Behold the Lord cometh with ten thouſand of his Saints, to execute Judgment upon all, to convince all that are ungodly amongſt us of all their ungodly Deeds, which they have ungodlily committed, and of all their hard Speeches which ungodly Sinners have ſpoken againſt him.*

FINIS.

Printed by Bye and Law, St. John's Square, Clerkenwell.